

Empire it was justifiable. There could then be no doubt that degeneracy was indeed attacking the nation.

What Zola himself thought on the subject was indicated by him with vigorous indignation in a newspaper article apropos of the licentious operettas of the time. Protesting against all the clappers who went into ecstasies when a so-called actress emphasised "some obscene expression by her contortions," he exclaimed: " *Ah, misere* I on the day when the sublime idea occurs to some woman to play the part of a -----, *au naturel*, on the stage, Paris will fall ill with enthusiasm. But what else can you expect ? "We have grown up amid shame; we are the bastard progeny of an accursed age. As yet we have only reached jerking of the hips, exhibition of the bosom; but the slope is fatal, and we shall roll down it to the very gutter unless we promptly draw ourselves erect and become free men."¹

But another point has to be considered. At the very outset of Zola's scheme the predisposition towards certain branches of science which he had shown in his youth revived. The question of hereditary influence had already attracted his attention while he was writing "Madeleine Fe'rat/" and it assumed larger proportions and greater complexity when he began to think of his projected family history.

The members of the family in question (like all others) would be affected not merely by their actual environment but also by psychological conditions coming from their progenitors. Zola felt that he must study the question carefully, and for some months his spare time was spent at the Bibliotheque Imperiale (now Nationale) where he read every book he could discover treating of hereditary influence.

¹ "La Tribune," October, 1869.